

Chamber of Local Authorities

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15 October 2014

Municipal elections in the Netherlands (19 March 2014)

Monitoring Committee
Rapporteur:¹ Pearl PEDERGNANA, Switzerland (L, SOC)

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Summary

This is the first ever report on observation of municipal elections in the Netherlands by the Congress. The initiative for the visit was taken by the Dutch delegation to the Congress, and an official invitation was received from the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Frans Timmermans.

The Congress election observation delegation welcomed the openness, transparency and the inclusiveness of election processes in the Netherlands. The delegation was impressed by the overall organisation of the elections and the high level of personal dedication and democratic commitment of the staff involved. They agreed with the Dutch Electoral Council (Kiesraad) that a secure system of electronic vote counting would speed up the counting process and make it less cumbersome. The Congress is following with interest the (ongoing) consultation in the country on the re-introduction of a secure system of electronic voting (ballot printers) and counting (scanners) - as well as the introduction of voting on the internet, while acknowledging that all this cannot be considered a priority due to the ongoing economic crisis.

The Congress regretted the absence of regulations concerning limitations of expenditure and the sponsoring of parties and campaign financing and heard that legal provisions are already under way in the Netherlands to remedy the situation.

1. Chamber of Local Authorities / R: Chamber of Regions
EPP/CCE: European People's Party Group in the Congress
SOC: Socialist Group
ILDG: Independent Liberal and Democratic Group
ECR: European Conservatives and Reformists Group
NR: Members not belonging to a political group of the Congress

MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS IN THE NETHERLANDS (19 MARCH 2014)

RECOMMENDATION 358 (2014)²

1. Following an invitation by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to observe the municipal elections in the Netherlands on 19 March 2014, the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe refers to:
 - a. the principles laid down in the European Charter of Local Self-Government (ETS No. 122) which was ratified by the Netherlands on 20 March 1991, and its Additional Protocol, ratified by the Netherlands on 13 December 2010;
 - b. Congress Resolution 306(2010)REV on observation of local and regional elections – strategy and rules of the Congress;
 - c. Congress Resolution 353(2013)REV on Congress post-monitoring and post-observation of elections: developing political dialogue.
2. It reiterates the fact that genuinely democratic local and regional elections are part of a process to establish and maintain democratic governance, and observation of political participation at territorial level is a key element in the Congress' role as guardian of territorial democracy.
3. The Congress was pleased to see the transparency, openness and inclusiveness of voting processes in the Netherlands and the high-level democratic commitment of the staff involved in the organisation of the municipal elections on 19 March 2014.
4. It observed with satisfaction the pragmatic approach to electoral management in the Netherlands which is well-embedded in the overall socio-cultural set-up and the long-standing democratic tradition of the country.
5. The Congress continues to follow with great interest the open consultation and informed debate in the country concerning a secure system of electronic voting and counting.
6. It is, however, concerned about the absence of regulations on party and campaign financing, limitations on campaign expenditure and conditions for sponsorship of political parties.
7. The Congress therefore encourages the Dutch authorities to pursue:
 - a. the course taken in view of adopting – as soon as possible – regulations on party and campaign financing;

2. Debated and approved by the Chamber of Local Authorities on 14 October 2014 and adopted by the Congress on 15 October 2014, 2nd sitting (see Document CPL(27)3FINAL, explanatory memorandum), rapporteure : Pearl PEDERGNANA, Switzerland (L, SOC).

b. the policy aimed at improving the counting procedures and the possibility of introducing legal provisions for the re-count of votes;

c. the strategy to minimise the risk of fraud with regard to the long-established system of proxy voting in the Netherlands and to consider the testing of early voting by post as an alternative system.

MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS IN THE NETHERLANDS (19 MARCH 2014)

EXPLANATORY MEMORANDUM

INTRODUCTION

1. Following an invitation by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of the Netherlands of 15 August 2013, the Bureau of the Congress decided to observe the municipal elections held on 19 March 2014. This was the first time ever an election observation mission was deployed by the Congress to the Netherlands. Pearl Pedergrana (Switzerland, L, SOC) was appointed Head of Delegation and Rapporteur.

2. The electoral mission took place from 16 to 20 March 2014 and comprised 13 members from 12 European states. On Election Day, 6 Congress teams were deployed around the country and observed the vote in more than 100 polling stations. The details of the delegation, programmes and deployment areas appear in the appendices.

The following report focuses specifically on issues arising out of exchanges held with Congress interlocutors in the context of the 2014 municipal elections in the Netherlands and on observations made by members of the delegation on Election Day. The Congress wishes to thank all of those who met with the delegation for their open and constructive dialogue. It also thanks the Association of Dutch Municipalities (VNG), the Ministry of the Interior of the Netherlands, the Dutch Electoral Council and all who lent their support in preparing this mission.

1. Political context

3. The Netherlands is a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary governing system. The Head of State, since 30 April 2013, is King Willem-Alexander who is a member of the government and has advisory tasks of a symbolic nature. The Netherlands has a bicameral parliament. The 75 members of the Senate are elected by the provincial parliaments (States Provincials). The States Provincials are directly elected by the electorate of the province. The House of Representatives has 150 seats and is directly elected by the population according to proportional representation (the number of valid votes cast divided by 150) in a party open - list system.

4. The last general elections - in which 21 parties took part - were held in September 2012. As a result of these elections, the House of Representatives is composed of the following 14 parties – with the number of seats they hold shown in brackets: People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (41); Labour party (38) (the government coalition is formed of these 2 parties); Socialist Party (15); Christian Democratic Appeal (13); Party for Freedom (12); Democrats 66 (12); Christian Union (5); Green Left (4); Reformed Political Party (3); Party for the Animals (2); 50PLUS (2); Van Vliet (1), BONTES (1) and Van Klaveren (1). Turnout was 74.6%³.

5. The previous municipal elections held in 2010 were dominated by local parties winning 2,277 seats, amounting to 23.7% of the seats distributed in municipal councils. Amongst parties also active at national level, the Labour Party (PvdA, leader Diederik Samson, 15.74%), the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD; leader Prime Minister Mark Rutte, 15.68%) and the Christian Democratic Appeal Party (CDA, leader Sybrand van Haersma Buma, 14.82%) achieved double-digit results. 18 other parties, that won less than 10% of the vote, gained seats. Turnout was 54.13%.

2. Administrative structure at local and regional level

6. Decentralised administration in the Netherlands is, principally, based on three legal texts: the Constitution, the Province Act (1992) and the Municipalities Act (1992). The Constitution establishes that the organisation of municipalities and the composition and powers of their administrative organs will be regulated by an Act of Parliament. There are currently over 400 municipalities. The

³ Electoral Council (Kiesraad) - www.kiesraad.nl

representative governing body at municipal level is the Municipal Council (*Gemeenteraad* or *Raad*). The Board of Mayor and Aldermen (*College van Burgemeester en Wethouders*) and the Mayor (*Burgemeester*) are the executive body.

7. The Municipal Council outlines the local authority's policy and monitors its implementation. It establishes important local regulations, ordinances and by-laws, setting the budget as well as the annual account. It establishes general policies in a broad range of areas, such as transportation, social welfare, health, education, economy, environment, housing and spatial planning, and decides on major issues such as changes of municipal borders, inter-municipal cooperation and major investments.

8. The Board of Mayor and Aldermen and the Mayor jointly constitute the municipal executive where the administrative powers are concentrated. The Aldermen are nominated by the Council and their number cannot exceed 20% of the number of members of the Council. Furthermore, Aldermen cannot simultaneously be Councillors (which was possible before the Act on Dualism).

9. The Mayor is the official representative of the municipality and chairs both the Council and the executive - the Board of Mayor and Aldermen. Mayors are responsible for public order, as well as management and regulation in local emergency situations, and activities in public spaces. The Mayor serves a six-year term, which is renewable without limits. Mayors are not elected directly, either by the local residents or by the Council. Although, in formal terms, the appointment is made by Royal Decree, in practice, the Mayor is appointed from among candidates "selected" or "identified" by the Council. A vacancy notice is published identifying the desired profile for Mayor, and applicants can compete for the job.

10. The capital city of the Netherlands, under the Constitution, is Amsterdam. In practice however, the official seats of the two Chambers of Parliament (Staten Generaal), of the Departments of the national government and of the Council of State (Raad van State) are located in The Hague. Amsterdam (contrary to several European capitals) does not enjoy a specific legal status as a capital city in matters of internal organisation, taxation, finance, etc. and is subject to the Municipalities Act. It is run by the City Council, by the College of Aldermen and by the Mayor – as any other Dutch city.

11. In respect of territorial organisation, Amsterdam is divided into seven districts: Stadsdeel West, Stadsdeel Noord, Stadsdeel Oost, Stadsdeel Zuidoost, Stadsdeel Centrum, Stadsdeel Zuid and Stadsdeel Nieuw-West. Each district has extensive independent powers, its own budget and its civil servants. Also, each district has its own decentralised offices (Stadsdeelkantoren). Another particular feature of Amsterdam is the complex settlement of intertwined neighbouring municipalities. Therefore, a number of issues must be tackled at metropolitan level (involving the geographical space around Amsterdam made up of 35 municipalities): spatial planning, accessibility and mobility, economic policy, preservation of landscape etc.

12. Regional democracy takes place at the level of the provinces (Provincies), providing an "intermediate" level of government, between the central state and the municipalities. There are 12 provinces: Groningen, Friesland, Drenthe, Overijssel, Gelderland, Flevoland, Utrecht, Noord-Holland, Zuid-Holland, Zeeland, Noord-Brabant and Limburg. They are territorial, administrative-governmental bodies, with their own competencies and powers (regional development, land use planning, energy, regional transport, agriculture and nature protection, conservation of monuments etc.). They have a certain autonomy through the raising of their own taxes, however this is restricted as most of the financial means are received from the central government. In 2012, the sources of income for provinces were: local taxes (1.5 billion Euros), special transfers from line departments (1.8 billion Euros), Provincial Fund (1.7 billion Euros) and other income (4.7 billion Euros).

13. There is discussion underway about the role and nature of provinces in the Netherlands. There are governmental plans to merge some provinces (starting with Noord-Holland, Utrecht and Flevoland) in order to create five sub-national regions. These new and bigger regions would replace the present 12 provinces. The next elections to the Provincial Parliaments (States Provincials) will be on 18 March 2015⁴.

⁴ Electoral Council (Kiesraad) www.kiesraad.nl

14. In respect of current challenges at grassroots' level: as from 1 January 2015, the government will transfer to cities responsibility for youth protection; youth probation; youth mental health care, immigrant youth policy and many other activities in the field of youth support services. At the same time major cuts are expected. As far as Amsterdam is concerned, which has a budget of approximately 365 million Euros for supervision, care, domestic support, accommodation and transport, the City overall will have to save more than 400 million Euros.

15. In general, the financial resources of local authorities has given rise to controversy in the Netherlands. In 2012 the major sources of income for municipalities were: local taxes (8.3 billion Euros), specific transfers from line departments (10.1 billion Euros), Municipality Fund (18.5 billion Euros) and other income (12.3 billion Euros).

3. Electoral management

3.1 Electoral legislation

16. Electoral legislation is governed by the Constitution; The Elections Act (1989); the Elections Decree (1989), the Municipalities Act (1992) and other ministerial regulations.⁵ The right to elect and be elected is available to those over 18 years of age, residing in the municipality. They may be a national of the Netherlands, the European Union, or any other nationality legally resident for 5 years or more. Voting is not compulsory and the voter may choose to vote in any polling station within the municipality. Elections for municipal councils are held every 4 years based on the proportional representation system (which applies to all tiers of government in the Netherlands).

3.2 The Dutch Electoral Council (Kiesraad)

17. The Dutch Electoral Council (Kiesraad) is set up under the Elections Act (Kieswet). It is the central electoral body for the Netherlands. It consists of seven members appointed by Royal Decree for a period of four years - renewable twice. They are appointed on the basis of their expertise in election law and elections. The current Chairman is Professor Dr H.R.B.M Kummeling.⁶ In the case of municipal elections, the Electoral Council ("Kiesraad") is the general information and advisory body for all matters related to the vote. This is the only task of the Kiesraad at local level. All other issues (practical organisation of the elections, decision on members and Chair of the electoral committees, training of the members of the committees etc) are dealt with by the municipal councils. Electoral committees comprise at least three and a maximum of seven, members and work in shifts (there are approximately 10.000 polling stations in total). In principle, everybody over 18 years can apply to become a member of an electoral committee and training is obligatory. The Kiesraad also provides a wealth of information to voters - from practical information on which elections are forthcoming and how to vote or take part, to providing analyses and policy papers and consultation documents.

3.3 Party registration and candidates

18. In general, there are not very many requirements in the Netherlands to run as a party in the elections. It requires legal personality and a deposit of 112,50 Euros. New parties must make a deposit of 225 Euros and present a statement of support. All in all, 1,024 political parties ran in the municipal elections on 19 March 2014. In 375 municipalities (out of 380) local political parties took part.

3.4 Voter registration

19. The voters' register in the Netherlands is based on an automatic people's registration system ("passive" registration). Forty-three days before Election Day, the voting card is distributed to the electorate. It contains different security features (for example, a hologram) and has to be presented to the electoral committee together with the identity document.

⁵ https://www.kiesraad.nl/en/advies_publicatie/elections-act-and-elections-decree

⁶ www.kiesraad.nl

3.5 Observers

20. Dutch society is characterised by a high-trust system allowing observation of electoral processes on a large scale. Anyone (including the media) can be an observer in polling stations and also stay during the count. However, in practice there are not many “observers” present during the vote and the counting. On 19 March 2014, the issue of taking “selfies”⁷ in polling stations and voting booths was discussed. The only restriction by law is that a ballot must not be able to be traced back to the voter. In a briefing with the Congress’ delegation, the Minister of the Interior confirmed that the Ministry is not against “selfies” as long as pictures are not taken of other voters.

3.6 Proxy voting

21. A particular specificity of electoral practice in the Netherlands is the long-established system of proxy voting.⁸ A proxy may only vote on behalf of up to 2 other people, and at the same time as they cast their own vote. The voter authorises the proxy using the form on the back of the polling card which the proxy presents at the polling station together with the voter’s identity card. The Congress delegation was informed that research shows between 10-11% of votes are cast by proxy. Official statistics gathered by “Statistics Netherlands” show that the figure is doubled for non-western voters as for example in 2006 when 21% of voters with a non-western background voted in this way.⁹ There is no tradition of domestic early voting by post in local elections (although it is in place for overseas votes in national elections). Despite the long tradition of proxy voting in the Netherlands, Congress’ interlocutors made the delegation aware of a small amount of possible misuse and there were media reports about this issue. Nevertheless, vote-buying is not, so far, an issue in the Netherlands.

3.7 Campaign financing

22. Unlike many other established democracies, the Netherlands has no legislation in place at present regarding party and campaign financing, nor in the setting of limits and conditions regarding donation. However, the Congress delegation was informed that this situation is being addressed and legislation was expected within the next two years. At present, there are no regulations concerning limitations of expenditure by donors or sponsors for candidates or parties. Parties represented in the national Parliament qualify for a government subsidy depending on the number of members. There are no regulations on party financing at local level.

3.8 Electronic voting

23. Although electronic voting and counting were not in use for these 2014 municipal elections, the issue has been widely debated. The latest study (2013) by the Electronic Voting at Polling Stations’ Commission¹⁰ (the Commission) received a first response from the Government in April this year, requesting further research before its final opinion is given. The Dutch were early introducers of electronic voting and counting machines so that in 2006 almost all municipal authorities were using voting machines. However, serious controversies arose about the security and reliability of the electronic process, as well the secrecy of the ballot, which led to the re-introduction of paper ballots and manual counting from 2007. The latest Commission study recommends switching to electronic counting to speed up results and reduce counting mistakes. It also considers that introducing electronic ballot printers to cast votes would considerably improve accessibility for voters with impairments as well as reduce the possibilities for voter error - such as unintentionally invalidating the ballot. The cost of introducing such a system however is a major obstacle; the one-off purchase price alone is estimated by the Commission to be between 150 and 250 million euros¹¹ – the ever-diminishing lifecycle of technical equipment making an accurate figure difficult to assess.

⁷ selfie: taking a photograph of oneself – usually with a mobile phone

⁸ https://www.kiesraad.nl/sites/default/files/Pdf_voor_Engelse_site-Elections_Act.pdf

⁹ <http://www.cbs.nl/en-GB/menu/themas/overheid-politiek/publicaties/artikelen/archief/2009/2009-2802-wm.htm>

¹⁰ also called the Van Beek Committee.

¹¹ <https://www.kiesraad.nl/sites/default/files/Conclusions-and-recommendations%20report%20Committee%20Van%20Beek.pdf>

4. Election Day

24. Access to polling stations was excellent for those with reduced mobility both in terms of entering the polling station and being able to access the equipment. All polling stations visited provided the possibility of low counters or desks for wheelchair access to fill in ballot papers. In terms of geographical access, polling stations were situated in places that were easy to manage in the working day (Polling Day was a Wednesday) such as train stations, shopping malls and even restaurants, or near drop-in centres for the elderly.

25. Congress observers noted that the vote count was totally transparent and anyone who wished to observe was able to do so. The polling station staff knew their roles and the count proceeded smoothly. Nevertheless, ballot papers for the municipal elections can be large – one Congress team observed a ballot paper, approximately 20 centimetres long, listing 21 parties competing, one party having 18 candidates on their list alone. This means that the count, which is done by hand, can be a cumbersome and lengthy process.

5. Election results¹²

26. Local parties again dominated these municipal elections, and even strengthened their position by almost 5%, gaining 2,819 seats, 399 more than in 2010. The Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) became the largest party nationally, earning 14% of the votes. Of the other parties active at national level, Democrats 66 (D66) made the most gains compared to 2010 with a 3.8% increase in their number of seats, giving them overall 11.8% of the vote. The Labour Party (PvdA) lost almost 5% of their votes, to stand at 10.2% nationwide. The other party in the ruling coalition, the People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), lost 3.6% of their votes (325 seats) gaining 11.9% overall. The turnout was 53.8%.

27. The voting pattern was even more striking in Amsterdam¹³ where the Labour Party (PvdA) lost over 10% of their votes, and the D66 gained 11.5%, doubling their number of seats to 14. Turnout in the city was 48.7%.

6. Conclusions

28. The Congress was delighted to be invited to make its first observation of municipal elections in the Netherlands. It found the election process to be open, transparent and inclusive with a pragmatic approach to electoral management, well embedded in the socio-cultural set-up and tradition of the country. A high number of parties compete in Dutch elections partly owing to the absence of a threshold. Due to an earlier experience of electronic voting, electronic voting is not currently available to Dutch voters, and neither is postal voting, although proxy voting has long been an established feature of the Dutch system. Electronic counting systems are also not currently available which, together with the high number of competing parties, can lead to a cumbersome vote-count. However, the polling station staff were efficient, well trained and organised and the Congress delegation was impressed by the quality of information available to voters, both online and in print, about how and where to vote; who was standing for election and the responsibilities of those concerned with electoral management.

¹² <http://verkiezingen.volkskrant.nl/uitslag/resultaten.html>

¹³ <http://verkiezingen.volkskrant.nl/uitslag/resultaten.html?anpld=169>

APPENDIX I**Delegation and programme**

Congress Mission to observe municipal elections in the Netherlands
(16 to 20 March 2014) – Delegation

Members of Congress

Ms Pearl PEDERGNANA, SOC, L, Switzerland (Head of Delegation)

Mr Matej GOMBOSI, EPP-CCE, L, Slovenia
 Mr Mihkel JUHKAMI, EPP-CCE, L, Estonia
 Mr David KATAMADZE, EPP-CCE, L, Georgia
 Ms Anna-Maria MAGYAR, EPP-CCE, R, Hungary
 Mr Tomislav TOLUSIC, EPP-CCE, R, Croatia
 Mr Raymond TABONE, SOC, L, Malta
 Ms Sari JANATUINEN, SOC, L, Finland
 Mr Vincent MCHUGH, ILDG, L, Ireland
 Mr Jaroslav HLINKA, ILDG, L, Slovak Republic
 Ms Alison COOK, ECR, R, United Kingdom

Congress secretariat

Renate ZIKMUND
 Carol-Anne HUGHES



**CONGRESS ELECTION OBSERVATION MISSION
 MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS IN THE NETHERLANDS, PROGRAMME, 16 – 20 MARCH 2014**

SUNDAY 16 MARCH

Various times **Arrival of the Congress delegation**

[*NH Hotel Carlton,*](#)
Vijzelstraat 4. 1017 HK,
Amsterdam, The Netherlands

MONDAY 17 MARCH

08:30 - 09:00 Welcome and internal briefing (Congress secretariat and delegation)

Venue: Paganini meeting room
NH Hotel Carlton, Vijzelstraat 4. 1017 HK, Amsterdam

09:00 - 10:30 Transfer from hotel (Amsterdam) to The Hague

10:30 - 12:30 **Meeting with Ministry of the Interior, The Hague**
 Minister Ronald PLASTERK, Minister of the Interior and Kingdom
 Relations, and government experts (see separate programme)

Venue: Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations
Turfmarkt 147
2511 DP The Hague

12:30 – 13:30 Lunch (The Hague)

13:30 – 14:00 **Meeting with Ms Kriens, CEO of The Association of Dutch Municipalities (VNG International)**

Venue: VNG Building
Nassaulaan 12
2514 JS The Hague

14:00 -15:00 **Meeting with the delegation of The Netherlands to the Congress**

Venue: VNG Building
Nassaulaan 12
2514 JS The Hague

15:00 – 16:30 Transfer to Amsterdam

TUESDAY 18 MARCH

10:00 – 10:45 Daily briefing/summary (Hotel bar/reception tbc)

10:45 – 11:00 Walk to Bazel Conference Centre (5 minutes on foot)

11:00 – 12:00 **Meetings with representatives of political parties**

Venue: The Italian Room
Bazel Conference Centre,
Vijzelstraat 32, Amsterdam

Host: Mr Gerolf Bouwmeester, Member, Amsterdam City Council (D66 Democratic Party), and member of the Presidium (daily management City Council)

12:00 - 12:45 Lunch break

12:45 – 14:00 Transfer to The Hague

14:00 – 15:30 **Meeting with members of the Dutch Electoral Council (Kiesraad)**

Venue: Office of the Electoral Council
Herengracht 21, 2511 EG The Hague

Contact: Mr. W.A.E. (Edward) Brühem
Senior legal advisor / co-ordinator international affairs
Electoral Council of the Netherlands

15:45 – 16:45

Transfer to Amsterdam NH Hotel Carlton

17:00 – 17:30

Briefing for Election Day with Interpreters and Drivers

Venue: *NH Hotel Carlton (bar/lobby)*

Vijzelstraat 4. 1017 HK,

Amsterdam, The Netherlands

APPENDIX II**Deployment of teams**

TEAM	OBSERVERS	PROVINCE	DISTRICTS
1	Mihkel JUHKAMI David KATAMADZE	Groningen & Friesland	Groningen, Leeuwarden
2	Matej GOMBOSI Anna-Maria MAGYAR	Overijssel & Gelderland	Zwolle, Apeldoorn, Deventer
3	Renate ZIKMUND Pearl PEDERGNANA	Noord Holland & Flevoland	Amsterdam, Diemen & environs (Almere / Lelystad & Hoorn / Alkmaar)
4	Alison COOK Vincent MCHUGH	Zuid Holland	Leiden, The Hague, Delft
5	Jaroslav HLINKA Carol-Anne HUGHES Tomislav TOLUSIC	Utrecht & Noord Brabant	Utrecht & S'Hertogenbosch
6	Raymond TABONE Sari JANATUINEN	Noord Brabant	Eindhoven, Tilburg, Breda

APPENDIX III

Press Release - CG010 (2014)

Congress delegation welcomes the transparency of the organisation of local elections in the Netherlands

Strasbourg, 20 March 2014 - A delegation of 13 members of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe from 12 European countries, observed the local elections in the Netherlands on 19 March 2014, at the invitation of the Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs. Pearl Pedergnana (Switzerland, L, SOC), Head of delegation and Rapporteur, presented the preliminary conclusions today at a briefing for media representatives, she underlined the openness, transparency and inclusiveness of the election process in this country.

"We observed a pragmatic approach to the electoral management in the Netherlands which is well embedded in the overall socio-cultural set-up and tradition of the country," stated Pearl Pedergnana.

However, the Congress delegation raised a few points to be addressed by the Dutch authorities, in particular regarding the counting of the votes. "We agree with the experts of the Dutch Electoral Council, the Kiesraad, that a secure system of electronic vote counting should be introduced rapidly, in order to speed up the counting process and professionalise the counting which is currently quite cumbersome," explained Pearl Pedergnana.

The Congress delegation, noting the high number of competing parties, also invited the Netherlands to consider other regulations for the creation of parties and the introduction of thresholds. It also invited the Dutch authorities to consider the introduction of early voting by mail as well as advancing further on tools to vote via the Internet.

Finally, the rapporteur regretted the absence of regulations concerning limitations of expenditure and sponsoring of party and campaign financing. "We heard during our meeting in the Ministry of the Interior that legal provisions were under way and we can only support the Dutch authorities in this endeavor" concluded the Congress rapporteur.

The Congress delegation visited around 120 polling stations throughout the Netherlands, including Amsterdam, Hoorn, Zwolle, Apeldoorn, Deventer, Leiden, The Hague, Delft, Utrecht, Eindhoven, Tilburg, Breda, Groningen, Leeuwarden and in many other smaller communities.

The report on the observation of elections will be debated at the June meeting of the Congress Monitoring Committee.